

*Dissenters from  
the Book*

by GEORGE STEINER



THE MAURY A. BROMSEN LECTURE  
IN HUMANISTIC BIBLIOGRAPHY

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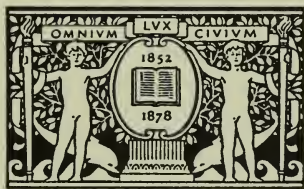


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## *Introduction*

Internationally renowned as an authority on the English language, comparative literature, philology and linguistics, Dr. Steiner truly straddles centuries in his knowledge, continents in his birth and education, *belles lettres* in their diversity.

Born in Paris in 1929, George and his cultured, affluent Austrian Jewish parents moved to the United States just before the German occupation of Paris. Twenty years later he graduated from the University of Chicago with a B.A.; from Harvard (M.A. in 1950); and from Oxford (as a Rhodes Scholar, Ph.D., 1955). He holds honorary doctorates from thirteen colleges and universities, among them: Louvain, Mt. Holyoke, Glasgow, Rome, and Trinity (Dublin). He has authored more than one hundred books and periodical articles. His medals and decorations—in modern parlance—are awesome!

Scott Lahti of the *National Review* described how most readers find Steiner “by turns richly allusive, metaphoric, intensely concerned, prophetic, and apocalyptic—and almost always captivating.”

Dr. Steiner once acknowledged in the *New York Times Book Review* that he was astonished, “naive as it seems to

people, that you can use human speech both to bless, to love, to build, to forgive and also to torture, to hate, to destroy, and to annihilate.”

How well he reads himself. George Steiner moves from incantations of love or anathema to despots despising challenges or contradictions; then to the institutionalized amnesia of education. Again and again, he demonstrates that he is not only a Renaissance Man, but a brilliant scholar of many words, many worlds.

To list all Steiner’s degrees, achievements, and medals would mandate a volume in itself. After reading the “Dissenters from the Book,” that follows, I suggest that you turn to the latest volume of *Contemporary Authors*. You will discover that Steiner, now in his early seventies, is more energetically contemporary than ever!

We applaud Dr. Maury A. Bromsen for bringing Dr. Steiner to the Library’s dais. He is a much-honored, much-decorated authority on the history and bibliography of the Americas, a distinguished editor, and an expert in rare book collecting and services. In the past he has brought to the series: Beaumont Newhall dealing with *Photography and the Book*; John Parker’s *Windows into China*; James Hart’s *New Englanders in Nova Albion*—so many, so eclectic, each so significant.

Again and again the founder of the Maury A. Bromsen Lectures in Humanistic Bibliography proves to be as erudite and visionary as the lecturers themselves. After last year’s *Revisiting the Sixties* by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., we asked, “Where can Bromsen find another super scholar?” And he found Dr. Steiner!

Let me conclude by comparing George Steiner to a volcano, erupting in glowing flashes of fire—then silent for



reflection, and later erupting once more into fresh brilliance.

We are honored to bring Dr. George Steiner, quintessential spokesman for the book, to the Athens of America, to the Boston Public Library.

BERNARD A. MARGOLIS  
PRESIDENT



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# *Dissenters from the Book*

IN A HOUSE OF BOOKS such as this, we tend to forget that books are not an inevitable or universal fact. That they are at all points vulnerable to cancellation or destruction. That they have their history, like all other human constructs, a history whose beginnings entail the possibility, the eventuality of an ending.

Of those beginnings we know little. Texts of a ritual, didactic nature may, in ancient China, date back to the second millennium before our era. The administrative, commercial writings of Sumeria, the proto-alphabets and alphabets of the eastern Mediterranean, tell of a complex evolution many of whose chronological details still elude us. In our western tradition, the first "books" are tablets of law, of commercial record, of medical instruction, or astronomical projection. Historical chronicles, intimately allied to triumphalist architecture and vengeful commemoration, certainly precede anything we can designate as "literature." The *Gilgamesh* epic, the earliest datable fragments in the Hebrew *Bible*, comes late, closer to Joyce's *Ulysses* than to their own origins, which are those of archaic song and oral narrative.

This is the crux. Writing constitutes an archipelago in

the midst of the vast seas of human orality. Writing, let alone the diverse formats of the book, makes up a special case, a particular technique in a semiotic totality largely oral. Tales were told, religious and magical teachings were transmitted, incantations of love or anathema were composed and handed on, tens of thousands of years prior to the development of written modes. We know of a teeming host of ethnic communities, of sophisticated mythologies, and natural lore, without literacy in any substantive sense. We know of none, on this planet, which lacks music. Music, in the guise of song and instrumental performance, looks to be truly universal. It is the fundamental idiom of communicated feeling and significance. Even today, statistics on literacy must be evaluated with exceeding caution. Much of mankind can make out only rudimentary written texts at best. Much of mankind does not read books. But it sings and it dances.

Western sensibility, that habit of inward recognitions, which are ours still, has a twofold source in Jerusalem and Athens. More exactly, our legacy of thought and of ethics, our reading of identity and death, derive from Socrates and from Jesus of Nazareth. Neither of whom pertains to the sphere of authorship, let alone publication. A point worth pondering (and the subject of a somewhat grim Harvard joke)!

In the entire panoply of Socrates's inexhaustibly complex and prodigal presences in the Platonic dialogues, in Xenophon's memoir, there are only one or two glancing allusions to the use of a book. Socrates does, at one point verify citations from an earlier philosopher by asking that the relevant scroll be brought to him. Otherwise, the whole of Socrates's teaching and exemplary fate, as nar-

rated by Plato, as invoked by successors such as Aristotle, belongs to the spoken word. There is no writing, no dictation.

The motives run deep. Face-to-face confrontation, oral communication in public spaces, are of the essence. The Socratic method is one of orality in which the actual encounter, the presentness (*acte de présence*) of the interlocutors is indispensable. With an art fully comparable to that of Shakespeare or Dickens, Platonic dialogues enact the bodily medium of articulate discourse. Socrates's notorious ugliness, his formidable physical endurance, be it in battle or during drinking bouts, the rhetoric of gesture and repose of perambulation and stasis, which generate his questions and meditations, embody (Shakespeare's idiom is "body forth") the thrust of argument and meaning. In Socrates, thought, even at its most abstract, allegory even at its most recondite, are lived experience irreducible to mute textuality. The charismatic spell that holds his lovers and disciples in thrall and the unnerving insistence on the laying bare of human pretensions and mendacities that madden his detractors, depend on resources of voice and mien, on scenarios of eccentricity. Socrates's brusque submergence into profound reflection in incongruous places and inapposite times is as vital to the enforcement of his teachings as are the words actually used.

Plato's critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*, encapsulated in a well-known Egyptian myth (and brilliantly taken up by Derrida), unquestionably reflects what he must have felt to be the paradoxical methods of his master. As always, there is irony in Plato's persuasion, for was he not himself a supreme *writer* and creator of a voluminous *oeuvre*? But the arguments against the written word put forward in the

fable are of uttermost cogency and, it may be, irrefutable to this day.

There is in the written text, be it clay tablet, marble, papyrus, or parchment, be it incised bone, scroll or book, a maxim of authority (which word, like its Latin source *auctoritas*, contains "author"). The mere fact of writing and written transmission entails a claim to the magisterial, to the canonic. There is a sense, obvious in theological-liturgical documents, in legal codices, in scientific treatises, in technical manuals, but pervasive also, though in a subtler, possibly self-subverting way even in comical or ephemeral compositions, in which all texts are contractual. They bind writer and reader to a promise of significance. In its very essence, writing is normative. It is "prescriptive," a term whose wealth of connotation and disclosure solicits close attention. To "prescribe" is to ordain, it is to anticipate on, and to circumscribe (another telling locution) a domain of conduct, of interpretation of intellectual or social consensus. "Inscription," "script," "scribe," and the highly energized semantic clustre to which they attach, relate the act of writing, intimately and unavoidably, to modes of governance. "Proscription," a cognate term, declares exile or death. At all points, even when masked with lightness, acts of writing and their enshrinement in books manifest power relations. The despotism exercised by a priesthood, by a political clerisy, by the law, over the illiterate or the sub-literate, is merely the external expression of this absolutely cardinal truth. The entailment of authority in a text, the possession and uses of the text by a literate élite, signify power. There is a disturbing propriety in the chained *tômes* of monastic and medieval libraries. Writing captivates sense (in Saint Jerome, the translator brings

home meaning as the triumphant conqueror brings home his captives).

Despots do not welcome, let alone invite, challenge or contradiction. Nor do books. The way in which we seek to question, to refute, to falsify a text is by writing another text. Hence the inertial logic of interminable commentary and commentary on commentary already foreseen in the dire perception of *Ecclesiastes* whereby there shall be no end to “the making of books.” (A radically talmudic dilemma perpetuated by Freud’s unease over “endless analysis”). In decisive contrast, argues the Platonic conceit, oral exchange allows, indeed licenses, immediate challenge, counter-statement, and correction. It enables the proponent to amend, to reverse if need be, his theses in the light of shared inquiry and exploration. Orality strives for truth, for honesty of self-correction, for a democracy, as it were of shared insight (F.R. Leavis’s “the common pursuit”). The written text, the book, would close the question.

The second point urged in the *Phaedrus*-myth is no less telling. Resort to writing, to the “scriptural” text, lames the powers of memory. That which is written, which is held in storage—the “memory banks” of our computers—need not be committed to memory. An oral culture is one of ever-renewed remembrance; a text or book-culture authorizes (again that slippery term) all manner of forgetting. This distinction reaches to the very heart of human identity and *civilitas*. Where memory is dynamic, where it is the instrument of psychological and communal transmission, inheritance is made present. The transmission of foundational mythologies, of sacred texts across millennia, the capacity of the bard and singer of tales to recite epic

immensities without any script, testify to the potential of memory in both executant and audience. To know “by heart”—observe the informing strength of that locution—is to take possession of, to be possessed by, the relevant matter. It is to allow the myth, the prayer, the poem to branch and blossom within oneself, modifying, enriching our inward landscape as we lead our lives, and being, in turn, modified and enriched by our journey through life. It is self-evident to ancient philosophy and aesthetics that Memory is, indeed, the Mother of the Muses.

As writing takes over, as the book enables us to “look it up,” the muscles of memory atrophy, the high arts of memory fall into disuse. Modern education is, more and more, institutionalized amnesia. It leaves the child’s mind empty of the ballast of lived reference. It substitutes for knowledge of and by heart the transient kaleidoscope of the ephemeral. It shrinks time to instantaneity and insinuates, even into dreams, a packaged homogeneity and laziness. What we do not learn and know by heart, to the limits of our always inadequate means, we do not truly love. Robert Graves’s lyric instructs us of the fact that “loving by heart” far transcends any mere “love of art.” It is to be in active touch with the font of our being. Books seal the well.

In what material sense Jesus of Nazareth was illiterate remains a vexed, perfectly insoluble conundrum. Like Socrates, he did not write or publish. The sole allusion to an act of writing in the *Gospels* is the wholly enigmatic pericope in John according to which Jesus, during the episode of the woman taken in adultery, traces words in the sand. In what tongue, signifying what? We shall never know because he effaces them at once. The divinely



infused wisdom of the boy Jesus routs the formal and textual sapience of the clerisy, of the temple scholars. He teaches in parables whose extreme concision, whose lapidary genre makes eminently possible and calls for commitment to memory. It is a tragic irony that Jesus' closest engagement with writing is that of the derisive scroll affixed to the cross. In all other respects, the magus and teacher out of Galilee is a being of the spoken word, an incarnation of the Word (*Logos*) whose primary doctrines and proofs are those of the existential, of a life and passion writ not in a text but in action. Addressed not to readers but to imitators, to witnesses ("martyrs") themselves very largely illiterate. The Judaism of the *Torah* and of the *Talmud* and the Islam of the *Koran* are "bookish" root and branch. The exemplification of Christianity in the *persona* of the Nazarene arises from and is proclaimed in orality.

But this disassociation, these polarities, will obtain within Judaeo-Christianity and in Christianity itself almost from the very start. They are implicit in the dialectic of "the Letter and the Spirit" that is central to our entire theme.

We know next to nothing of the motives, of the communal pressures that generated the Jesus narratives in the *Gospels*. Did they derive from a profoundly Hebraic impulse towards the sacred, legislative aura of textuality? From an almost instinctive compulsion to add to or suspend the existing canon of Jewish scripture, as yet diffuse, local and open-ended? We do not know and, it seems to me, do not always register the utter astonishment called for by the originality, by the unprecedented nature of the Gospel project (they are *not* like any previous or contemporaneous lives of sages, they are *not* like Plutarch's biographies or those of Diogenes's Laertius). Indeed, the gnarled ge-

nus of the synoptic *Gospels* seems to derive from the extreme tension between a substantive orality and a performative writing. Much of their teasing provocation lies in the shorthand transmission of the spoken word via a written narrative conceived, hurriedly set down, one conjectures, in the light of eschatological, apocalyptic expectations of a nearing end of the world and in the fear, perhaps subconscious, that there was no time left for the cultivation and refinement of oral memory.

The step into the “graphic,” into the circumference of the book, occurs in the Hellenism, in the flavour of Neo-Platonism in the *Fourth Gospel*. with its fiercely sophisticated stylistic play (as in the opening ode or hymn), and, above all, in Saint Paul. It is not only that Paul of Tarsus was, very probably, the ablest press and public relations virtuoso of whom we have record; he was, quite simply, one of the very great writers in the western tradition. His *Epistles* remain among the enduring masterpieces of rhetoric, of strategic allegory, of paradox and mordant sorrow in all literature. The bare fact that Saint Paul quotes Euripides tells us of a bookman almost antithetical to the man from Nazareth whom he transmutes into Christ. Very few figures in history—one thinks of Marx, of Lenin—have rivaled Paul’s sovereignty over propaganda, in its instrumental, etymological sense of didactic propagation, or his insight that written texts would transform the human condition. Precisely like Horace and Ovid—broadly speaking his contemporaries—Paul is certain that his words, in their scripted, published and republished format, will outlast bronze, will ring in men’s ears and minds when marble has been made dust. It is out of this credo, with its

Hebraic-Hellenistic antecedents, that will blossom the majestic images, the metaphors in action, of the *Book of Revelation* with its seven seals, of the *Book of Life*, as we find them in John of Patmos and throughout Christian eschatology. Again, we are very nearly at the antipodes to the orality of Jesus and to the pre-literate context of the first disciples. There were no libraries in Nazareth or on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Pauline Christology evolves into Roman Catholicism with its majestic armature of written doctrine and exegesis. This will include the vast corpus of patristic writings, the works of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, the literary genius of Saint Augustine, and the justly entitled *Summa* of Aquinas. But the initial tensions between "Letter and Spirit," between the monastic *scriptoria* to which we owe so much of the survival of the classics on the one hand and the preference for orality, indeed for non-literacy, on the other, have been perennial.

With very few exceptions, the Desert Fathers, the ascetics of the early Church held books and book-learning in abhorrence. The never-ending drill and circularity of prayer, the humiliation of the flesh, the discipline of meditation left little room for, or indeed rendered subversive, the luxury of reading. Where was the Stylite, where was the destitute dweller in the rock caves of Jordan or Cappadocia to put a library? This strain of penitential and prophetic orality will surface again and again, though often in covert guise, in the long history of Christian practise and apologetics. It is operative in the iconoclasm of Savonarola and, hauntingly, in the renunciations of Pascal with their acute suspicion of that incarnation of bookishness, Montaigne.

But the crux is the thoroughly ambivalent attitude of Rome to the reading of Holy Scripture outside a licensed elite. For many centuries, a lay-reading of the Bible was severely discouraged and, at numerous points, deemed heretical. Access to the *Old* and the *New Testament*, with their countless opacities, self-contradictions, and recalcitrant mysteries, was to be open only to those qualified by orthodox theological and hermeneutic study. If there is a seminal difference between Catholic and Protestant sensibility, it lies precisely in the respective attitudes to the reading of the Holy Book: absolutely central to Protestantism (despite Luther's occasional worries), but extraneous still to Catholic habits of feeling. The alliance between printing and Reformation is one of intense, mutually reinforcing kinship. The new dispensation of Gutenberg filled the Catholic Church with apprehension. The censorship of books, (I shall return to this problem), their physical destruction, runs like a fiery thread through the history of Roman Catholicism. However attenuated, the *imprimatur* and the *Index* of the prohibited, are part of that history still. It was not long ago that Galileo's philosophic dialogues were removed from that catalogue of sins. Spinoza's *Tractatus* is, unless I am mistaken, still included.

The instauration of the great royal and academic libraries, such as Charles V's deposit of a thousand manuscripts at the Louvre, Duke Humphrey's donation to the Bodleian at Oxford, or the university library of Bologna, date back to the late Middle Ages. Ducal collections and the book cabinets of ecclesiastics and humanistic scholars flourish in fifteenth-century Italy. Nevertheless, it is with the establishment of a middle class, of a privileged and schooled *bourgeoisie* throughout western Europe, that the

age of the book and of the classical act of reading is at high noon.

This act, together with the ancillary domain of the bookseller, of the publisher, of the literary digest and review, presupposes a by no means obvious concurrence of circumstances. These can be seen at work in such emblematic sites as the round-tower library of Montaigne, in Montesquieu's library at La Brède, in what we know of Walpole's library at Strawberry Hill, or that of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. Readers now own, in their private capacity, the resources of their reading, books no longer in some public, official setting. Such ownership, in turn, necessitates a specialized space, that of the room lined with bookshelves, with the lexica and works of reference that make serious reading possible (as Adorno observes, chamber music depends on the availability of corresponding chambers," most often in private houses). A further vital component is that of silence.

As urban and industrial civilization assert their dominance, the noise level begins an exponential increase which, today, touches on madness. For the privileged, in the classic act and epoch of reading, silence is still an available, though increasingly costly, commodity. Montaigne sees to it that even his immediate family is kept away from his book-lined sanctum. The stellar private libraries count on domestics to keep them clean, to oil their bindings. Above all, there is time for reading. The "library-cormorants," Lamb's vivid image, such as Sir Thomas Browne or Montaigne or Gibbon expend guarded days and nights on their leviathan reading. Is there anything that Coleridge or Humboldt had not read, annotated, enhanced with copious marginalia, often composing a second book in the

margins, flyleaves, and expanded footnotes of the first? Just when did Macaulay sleep?

Each of these vital coordinates is curtailed or undermined by the time of the eruption of barbarism and bloodlust in twentieth-century Europe and Russia. The accumulation of major private libraries becomes the passion of the few, of the *maecenas*. Living spaces shrink (today, the record cabinet, the pile of CD's or tapes will have replaced the bookshelf, particularly among the young). Silence has become a luxury. Only the most fortunate can escape the inrush of technological pandemonium. The notion of domestic service, of the valet or maid lovingly dusting the *tômes* from the top of the library stairs, is suspect nostalgia. Time has, as Hegel and Kierkegaard were among the first to notice, accelerated fantastically. The compacted leisure on which serious, silent, answerable reading depends, became the specialized, almost technical capacity of the academic, of the researcher. (Until very recently, Britain was a society in which men and women read adult, serious books while commuting, while sitting or perching in a crowded underground. The tyranny of tinkle and trash exercised by the mobile phone is swiftly putting an end to this archaic tradition). We kill time instead of being at home in its bounty. It is so much quicker to read reviews than to read books.

But even during the noontime of the book, roughly, say, between the age of Erasmus crying out in grateful triumph as he picks up a torn fragment of print in a sodden street and the catastrophe of two world wars, there are challenges, there are significant dissents. Not all moralists, social critics or even writers are prepared to concede that books are indeed, as Milton so famously would have it, the

irreplacable “life-blood of master spirits.” Two currents of negation, partly subterranean, deserve notice.

The first is one I would entitle “radical pastoralism.” It can be made out in Rousseau’s utopian pedagogy in *L’Émile*, in Goethe’s dictate that the tree of thought and of study is eternally gray, where that of enacted life, of the life-force and *élan vital*, is green. A radical pastoralism fuels Wordsworth’s affirmation that “one impulse from a vernal wood” outweighs the very sum of book-learning. However eloquent, however instructive, knowledge harvested from books and reading is second-hand; it is parasitic on immediacy. A cult of personal experience inhabits romanticism, as it does the vitalism of Emerson. Such experience cannot be delegated to the passivity of the imagined, of the merely conceptualized. To let books do our living, or any substantial portion thereof, for us is to relinquish both the risks and ecstasies of the primary. Most literature is, in the last analysis, artifice. Radical pastoralism aims for a politics of authenticity, for the nakedness of the self. Sparks of this fiery vision, at once disparate and kindred, fly, as it were, from the anvil of William Blake, with his sense of learning as often Satanic, of Thoreau, and of D. H. Lawrence. “I was in a Printing house in Hell,” says Blake, “& saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation.” The sixth chamber of Hell is occupied by spectral, unnamed creatures who “took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries.”

The second impulse of subversion, of dissent from the book, does exhibit affinities with radical pastoralism, but looks back also to the iconoclastic asceticism of the Desert Fathers. In what ways are books of any help to common, suffering humanity? Whom have they fed among the

starving? This is the angry question put by certain nihilists and anarchic revolutionaries towards the close of the nineteenth century, notably in Czarist Russia. The valuation of a rare manuscript or first edition (a valuation which, in our own day has reached fever pitch) above competing human needs and destitution is, so argue the nihilists, an obscenity. Pisarev's outcry is strident: "to the common man, a pair of boots far outweighs the collected works of Shakespeare or of Pushkin." In a pietistic version, this question torments the aged Tolstoy. Radicalizing Rousseau's paradox, Tolstoy finds high culture and higher literacy, in particular, to have been deleterious. They have impaired the spontaneity, the moral gravamen of men and of women. They have buttressed élitism, obeissance to mundane authority, a mendacious system of education, and the vices of frivolity. All that an honest spirit requires, thunders Tolstoy in repudiation of his own fiction, is a simplified version of the *Gospels*, a breviary of the essential as it derives from an *imitatio Christi*. Tolstoy knows full well and rejoices in the absence of writing from Jesus' teaching.

It is, again in Russia, that futurist and Leninist poets call for the burning of libraries, the official line, to be sure, being one of assiduous conservancy. The never-ending accumulation of books, of which the great libraries are the sanctuary, represent the dead but venomously infectious weight of the past. It fetters the imagination and the intellect with the irons of precedent. Passing through these labyrinthine stacks, through book deposits whose content runs into the millions, the soul shrivels into despairing insignificance. What is there to be added? How is a writer to rival the marmoreal canonization of the classics? Has not everything worth imagining, thinking, and saying been



realised before (how is anyone to write the word "tragedy" on a blank page, agonized Keats, when there is *Hamlet* or *King Lear* at his back?).

If the paramount task, of which the revolution is the outward expression, is that of essential renewal, of the renovation of human consciousness; if the thinker, the writer are indeed "to make it new" (Ezra Pound's famous imperative), the magisterial, the crushing weight of the cultural past must be broken. Let the mountainous tracts and theses perish when the Institute of Architecture goes up in cleansing flames (Vozhnesensky). Let the pandects, the encyclopedias, the *opera omnia* in dead languages be reduced to ash. Only then can the revolutionary thinker, the futurist or expressionist bard, make himself heard. Only then can the poet hope to create new languages, Khlebnikov's "star-speech" or Paul Celan's "language north of the future." It is a bacchanalian, perhaps desperate programme. Yet it has its auroral logic.

Dissenters from and enemies of the book have always been with us. Bookmen and bookwomen, if I may enlarge that urbane Victorian rubric, rarely pause to consider the fragility of their passion.

In Germany, in 1821, Heine, commenting on a bout of nationalist book-burning, remarked: "where books are burned today, human beings will be burned tomorrow." Books have been thrown on pyres throughout history. Many have been irrevocably consumed. Only of late, some sixteen hundred *incunabula* and illuminated manuscripts, as yet unreproduced, perished in the fiery waste of the library at Sarajevo. Fundamentalists of every hue are by instinct book-burners. As the Moslem conquerors of Alexandria are reputed to have proclaimed when consign-

ing that legendary library to the flames: "if it contains the *Koran*, we already have copies, if not, it is not worth preserving." No single copy of the Albigenian bible has survived; no copy of a major anti-trinitarian treatise by Servetus, assigned to public incineration by Calvin. Manuscripts, even typescripts by modern masters, are even more vulnerable. Cornered by Stalinist menace, Bakhtine used the pages of his work on aesthetics to supply hungrily-needed cigarette paper. Frightened of offending sexual taboos, Buchner's fiancée tossed into the oven the manuscript of his *Aretino* (probably the masterpiece of one who had already, in his twenties, created *Danton's Death* and *Wozzeck*).

But there are slower, less flamboyant executions. Censorship is as old and ubiquitous as writing itself. We have seen that it has attended on Roman Catholicism throughout its history. It has been a part of every tyranny, from that of Augustan Rome to the totalitarian régimes of today. There is simply no way of assessing the immensity of texts that have been emasculated, bowdlerized, falsified, or silenced altogether. But so-called democracies have their hand in the game. Classics and contemporary literature have, in this country, been bowdlerized or removed from public library and school bookshelves in the puerile, demeaning name of "political correctness." Attempts are currently under way to banish certain major novels by Nadine Gordimer from circulation in South Africa lest black readers feel patronized by her lucid, humane findings. Across much of the modern earth, in China, in India, and Pakistan, wherever the ghostly heritage of Fascism and Stalinism prevails, in more or less open police states and theocracies such as those of Islam and, fitfully,

Latin America, books are censored, writers imprisoned, *fatwas* issued.

Two queries complicate this grim business. The relations between censorship and creativity of the first order can prove strangely fruitful. The Elizabethan literary miracle, that of the France of Louis XIVth, the glorious chronicle of Russian poetry and fiction from Pushkin to Pasternak and Brodsky, do seem to hinge, in complex, dialectical ways, on the concomitant pressures and menace of censorship. That which is subversive in *all* great literature, that which says “No” to barbarism, to stupidity, to the trivialization of our works and days by the mass-consumption ethics of a late capitalism, has always flourished when stemming its nerve against censorship and oppression. “Squeeze us,” said Joyce in respect of Catholic censorship, “we are olives.” Or as Borges murmured, “censorship is the mother of metaphor.” Where the apparatus of suppression yields to the values of the mass media and the hype, as throughout eastern Europe today, junk triumphs.

The second footnote is even more problematic. Precisely because literature, philosophy, criticism in its full sense, can enrapture the human spirit, can transform our inward and external conduct, can convert us to action, they can also deprave, impoverish our consciousness, corrupt the images of desire we carry with us. The proposal and diffusion of, say, racist ideologies, of erotic sadism, of paedophilia, can incite to imitative conduct. The evidence is overwhelming, though difficult to quantify. Our newsstands, our soft and hardcore emporia, the inundation of the Internet and the Web by almost unimaginably sadistic pornography, do pose fundamental challenges to complete

liberty of expression and of publication. Milton's proud ideal of the assured defeat of falsehood by truth when these engage in open, uncensored combat, comes out of a world far different from ours. The Protocols of Zion can be bought on Japanese kiosks. Tracts negating the existence of the Nazi death-camps and of the Shoah are advertised and readily available from Warsaw to Buenos Aires. Is there, then, no rational case for *any* censorship? I have no answer, but do find liberal unctuousness on this point somewhat contemptible.

The electronic revolution, the planetary advent of the word processor, of electronic computation, of the Interface are exponentially more of a mutation than was the invention of moveable type around the time of Gutenberg. What is called Virtual Reality may alter the routines of consciousness. Data banks of as yet incommensurable capacity will replace the uncontrollable labyrinths of our libraries to a handful of microchips. What will be the effects on the act of reading, on the function of books as we have known and loved them? The issue is being widely and hotly debated.

So far, certain representative experiments have proved signally inconclusive. The interface exchanged between novelists and their readers in a dynamic of open-ended, aleatory collaboration (tested, for example, by John Updike), have generated ephemeral entertainment. Translation machines are primitive brutes quite unable to cope with the in-built semantic plurality of meaning and informing sphere of context pervasive in natural, let alone, literary languages. The transfer of manuscript and printed material onto the screen has been spectacular in volume and accessibility (it will soon concern some sixty million

items in the Library of Congress alone). It has literally transformed techniques of scholarship, of technological and scientific exchange, of illustration. Indeed, the Librarian of Congress has opined that only *belles lettres*, only texts aspiring to literary status, will, in future, be issued in book form, thus deepening even further the chasm between that which de Quincey had entitled the “literature of knowledge” and the “literature of power.” Already publishers are issuing books in a paperback format whose footnotes are only available on the Web (Penguin has decided to do so).

There is, on the other hand, no evidence that fewer books in traditional printed forms are being published. The contrary seems to be the case. In truth, it is the almost crazy plethora of new titles—121,000 in the United Kingdom last year—that may be the greatest threat to serious reading, to the survival of bookstores with quality titles and enough space to keep books in stock, to provide for minority interests and needs. In London, a first novel that does not catch the wind of immediate notoriety or critical acclaim will be returned to the publisher or remaindered within twenty days. There is quite simply no space left for the wonder of ripening, exploratory taste to which so many major works have owed their survival.

Nor is it at all clear whether the uses of the screen are indeed making traditional reading obsolete. Over time, the impact will deepen. Already there are studies that suggest that children nurtured on television and the Net are unwilling, or lack the skills required to read in the old sense. As the arts of memory, the gymnastics of concentration, the availabilities of silence wither—it is estimated that some eighty percent of American adolescents can only read if there is music in the background—the place of

reading in western civilization is bound to alter. It may be (and such a prospect is by no means dismaying) that the type of reading that I have sought to sketch and have called "classical" will again become a somewhat specialized passion, taught and pursued in "houses of reading," as it was by Akiba and his disciples after the destruction of the Temple, or as practised in the monastic schools and refectories of the Middle Ages. A type of reading that culminates, very precisely, in that exercise of thanks and in that music of the mind that is learning by heart (note the joyous paradox of cordiality, a word which contains that for "heart"). It is far too soon to tell. The period in which we live is one of transition more rapid, more difficult to "read" than any before us.

Allow me to conclude on a personal note.

The bestialities of Nazism, as they were planned, organized, and carried out in twentieth-century Europe, evolved in the heartlands of high literacy. In no country had the life of the mind, the production and understanding of books, the pursuit of the humanities in academe and at large been more honoured, more authoritatively sustained than in Germany. At no substantive point did the forces of literacy and of humanistic reception arrest the triumph of barbarism. Scholarship of the first rank continued under the Reich, in philology, in medieval and ancient history, in art history, in musicology. As Gadamer has put it, in a truly appalling sentence, it sufficed to behave *manierlich* ("with good manners, respectful of conventions") towards the Nazi regime in order to be able to pursue a brilliant career in the teaching and study of the classics. The sole precaution needed was that of not having committed the indiscretion of being a Jew! One of the most original, influen-

tial philosophers in western thought produced seminal texts throughout the war. Much of the history of this cheery coexistence between systematic inhumanity and the creative indifference or sympathy of high culture remains to be untangled. It extends, moreover, well beyond Nazi Germany. Occupied Paris witnessed the production of books and plays that count among the most important in modern French literature.

The scandal is not only one of coexistence. Literary and philosophic genius flirted with, gave hearing and support to, the midnight in man. We cannot divorce the manifest splendour of the achievements of Pound, of Claudel, of Céline, from their infernal politics. Complicated, in so many regards, “private” as it was, Heidegger’s relation to Nazism and foxy silence after 1945 are numbing. As is Sartre’s active support for Soviet communism long after the revelations of the camps or for savageries visited on writers, on intellectuals in Maoist China or Castro’s Cuba. “I will never derogate from the conviction that every anti-communist is a dog.” So proclaimed one of the master spirits of the age.

The clerisy of the intellect, the mandarin in the university, the *rat de bibliothèque*, is not trained for heroism. With signal exceptions, the McCarthyite windstorm—so much less perilous than any Fascist or Stalinist totalitarianism—was met with accommodation and the better part of valour. Again with signal exceptions, the blackmail of “political correctness” has elicited little resistance, little *dignitas* among academics. So many have howled with the wolves. And been devoured for their pains.

But these are surface phenomena; these are behavioural patterns. The crux may lie much deeper.

As I near the close of half a century of teaching and writing, of a lifetime of continuous reading and re-reading (I was not yet six when my father made me listen to the music of Homer, to John of Gaunt's valediction in *Richard II*, to the lyrics of Heine), I am haunted—there is no other word—by a psychological hypothesis. It is, I underline, only a hypothesis and, *Deo volente*, erroneous.

The hold of the imaginary, of "supreme fictions" as Wallace Stevens calls them, over human consciousness is mesmeric. The imaginary, the conceptualized abstraction, can invade and obsess the house of our sensibility. No one has given any integral account of the genesis of the fictional character out of the writer's mind, out of the scratches his pen makes on a sheet of paper. But that character can take on a life force, a power against time or oblivion far exceeding that of any living individual. Who among us here possesses even a fraction of the vitality, of the "real presence" that emanates from Homer's Odysseus, from Hamlet or Falstaff, from Tom Sawyer? Dying, Balzac cries for medical help from the doctors he had invented in his *Comédie humaine*. Shelley professes that no man in responsive love with Sophocles's *Antigone* can ever experience any comparable passion for a living woman. Flaubert sees himself dying like a dog, whereas "that whore" Emma Bovary will live forever.

Having spent hours, days, weeks, reading, learning by heart, explicating to ourselves and to others one of Horace's transcendent odes, a Canto in the *Inferno*, Acts three and four of *King Lear*, the pages on the death of Bergotte in Proust's narrative, we come home to our domestic, petty setting. But we remain possessed. The cry in the street is remote, if we hear it at all. It tells of a mess,



contingent, vulgarly transient reality incomparable with that in our possessed consciousness. What is that cry in the street set against that of Lear over Cordelia, of Ahab lashed to his white demon? Thousands, hundreds of thousands die on the daily television in a world of sanitized, packaged monotony. The destruction of remote statues by crazed Afghan fanatics, the mutilation of a masterpiece in a museum, strike us to the soul. The scholar, the true reader, the maker of books is saturated with the terrible intensity of the fiction, is schooled to respond to the highest pitch of identification with the textual, with the fictive. This schooling, this focus given to his nervous antennae and organs of empathy—whose reach is never boundless—may disable him from what Freud designated as “the reality principle.”

It is in that paradoxical sense that the cult and practise of the humanities, of the book addict and scholar, may in fact dehumanize. They may make it more difficult for us to respond actively to, to engage wholly with the intensive realities of social and political circumstances. There is a chill breath of inhumanity in Montaigne’s book tower, in Yeats’s ruling that one must choose between perfection of the life and of the work, in Wagner’s assurance that those who had helped him in his need were owed no repayment since footnotes to his biographies would make them immortal (wherein the repellent “library at Babel”).

How am I, as a teacher for whom literature, philosophy, music, the arts are the stuff of life itself, to translate that indispensability into moral, concrete awareness of human necessity, of the injustice that makes so much of high culture possible? The towers that isolate us are much stronger than ivory. I know no convincing answer.

Yet one must be found. If we are to earn the privilege of our passions, if we are to take in our hands the wonder of a new book—*Cui dono lepidum novum libellum*.<sup>2</sup>—as Catullus asks, and if we are to share, however modestly, in the wistful pride of his prayer: *quod, o patrona virgo / plus uno maneat perenne saeclo* (“O Muse, let us survive a century or two”). As shall this great Library.



